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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SY

SUBJECT: ABDUL AZIM TRIAL BEGINS; DETAINED ACTIVIST BEGINS HUNGER STRIKE

REF: DAMASCUS 06368

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Kathy Johnson-Casares for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The military court trial of opposition figure Hassan Abdul Azim began on December 18, as he faced charges of publication of material by an illegal organization. He is not in SARG custody. His next court date is set for January 19. Human rights organizations are also reporting that detained activist Mahmoud Sarem reportedly began a hunger strike on December 1, and that Kurdish prisoners may be starting a separate strike. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) MILITARY TRIAL OF OPPOSITION FIGURE BEGINS: Prominent opposition figure and Damascus Declaration signatory Hassan Abdul Azim appeared in a packed courtroom at the Mezze Military Court on December 18 to face charges. Abdul Azim, head of the Democratic Arab Socialist Union and spokesman for the opposition umbrella group National Democratic Front (NDF), was charged with publication of material by an illegal organization. He faces up to two years in prison, according to human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni. The charges are in connection with the August detention of Hassan Zeino, who was arrested for carrying NDF materials (reftel). Bunni noted that the military court took action against Abdul Azim after he appeared before the Homs Military Court to defend Zeino, claiming responsibility for the publication of an NDF newsletter which Zeino had in his possession at the time of his arrest.

¶3. (C) This move appears to be the end of the SARG's previous tolerance of the NDF, whose member parties are not legally registered due to the SARG's refusal to allow their registration. Over 120 lawyers joined Abdul Azim's defense team and tens of other civil society activists turned out to support Abdul Azim. Poloff also attended. The defense team filed two papers with the presiding judge, protesting that Abdul Azim, as a civilian, should not face military charges. They also insisted, citing Syrian statutes, that the presiding judge, a Ba'ath Party member, should not be allowed to rule on the case. Abdul Azim requested that the next trial session be held on January 19 to coincide with the ongoing military court trial of fellow activist and Damascus Declaration signatory Haithem al-Maleh (reftel). Abdul Azim has not been detained.

¶4. (C) POLITICAL DETAINEES THREATEN HUNGER STRIKES: Multiple human rights activists are reporting that detained civil society activist Mahmoud Sarem reportedly began a hunger strike on December 1. Sarem, a 68 year old writer and doctor, was detained in mid-September by SARG authorities and is currently being held in the political branch of Aadra prison. According to human-rights activists Anwar al-Bunni

and Muhammed al-Hasani, Sarem told family members in late November that he would begin refusing meals on December 1. As Sarem's family is granted only one visit per month, they have been unable to confirm whether or not he began the strike. Bunni and Hasani noted to PolOff that the State Security Court has also refused to allow Sarem to grant a power of attorney to human rights lawyers, thus delaying his case. Bunni also noted that a group of Kurdish prisoners were planning to begin hunger strikes at Aadra prison as well.

JOHNSON-CASARES